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Biographic Report

Harold WILSON
Prime Minister of Great Britain

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BR 74-59
October 1974

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Prime Minister Wilson campaigning in September

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PREFACE

As a result of the Labor Party victory at the polls on 10 October 1974, party leader Harold Wilson heads his fourth government in 10 years. It is the first time in this century that a British Prime Minister has won four elections. Wilson led his first two Cabinets during 1964-70 and was leader of the Shadow Government during the next 3½ years. In the election held on 28 February 1974, neither the Conservatives nor the Laborites gained a majority; Wilson formed a minority government—Britain's first in more than 40 years—that lasted until the Labor victory in October.

When he announced on 18 September that a general election would again be held, this time on 10 October, Wilson acknowledged that a second election within a year was something very few people would want to see at a time of very grave economic difficulties. Launching his party's campaign under the slogan "Britain will win with Labour," he urged voters to give Labor full control of Parliament because, he said, his government "has the policies for our national recovery" from the "gravest economic crisis since the war." Led by Wilson, the party generally projected an image of ministerial competence, social concern and self-confidence; it kept its leftwing figures and more radical policies somewhat under wraps.

When the final vote was tallied, Labor had gained 319 seats, a razor-thin majority of three over the combined strength of Conservatives (276), Liberals (13), Scottish Nationalists (11), Welsh Nationalists (3), Ulster Unionists (10) and others (3) in the 635-member House of Commons.

This does not give Prime Minister Wilson the strong mandate he aimed for in calling the election, but it does provide the majority that eluded him in the February general election.

This report was prepared by the Central Reference Service and was coordinated within CIA as appropriate. Comments and questions may be directed to [redacted]

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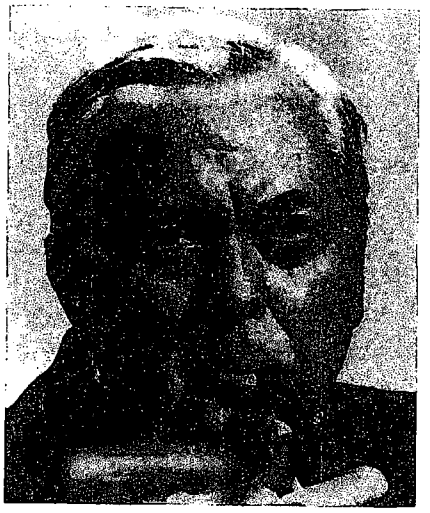
UNITED KINGDOM **(James) Harold WILSON**

Prime Minister



Labor Party Leader and Prime Minister Harold Wilson successfully led his party to victory in the general election held on 10 October 1974. For the previous 7 months he had headed Britain's first minority government in more than 40 years. He is a consummate politician—skillful, shrewd and subtle.

Because his 3-seat margin in Parliament is so slim, Wilson has little latitude to redeem his campaign pledges to party leftwingers and to the trade unions that form Labor's popular support. His government is expected to move toward the center and away from the strong leftist influence of the past; but in any event, Wilson will not turn back from the party's priority demands: the nationalization of development land and a state share of 51 percent in companies that discover oil in the North Sea.

Wilson was first elected a Labor Member of Parliament in 1945. He represented the Ormskirk Division of Lancashire until 1950 and has represented the Huyton Division of Lancashire ever since. Despite his lack of general popularity and his inability to lead the party aggressively, he has long been a favorite of Labor's left wing. In January 1963, after the sudden death of party leader Hugh Gaitskell, Wilson won easily over George Brown, the heir presumptive to the position. Wilson's support in Parliament came largely from Labor's leftwing faction, but he could not have won without help from the predominantly moderate Laborites.

Never a doctrinaire socialist, but rather a pragmatist who is keenly aware of the realities of power, Wilson has shown great skill in persuading the diverse and sometimes conflicting elements within his party to work together. He has a serious problem of maintaining discipline within the rambunctious Parliamentary Labor Party—the Laborite Members of Parliament—and he will have to take a firm stand to control the extremists in his government. Some of Wilson's closest associates have been charged with corruption, and several highly respected Laborites have resigned from the party in protest against its domination by the trade unions and its drift leftwards. Two of his Cabinet Ministers—Mrs. Shirley Williams and Roy Jenkins—say they will resign if the Labor government takes Britain out of the Common Market.

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Because of the party's success in the recent election, Wilson will continue his party leadership. There is no heir apparent and the party would be hard pressed to find another leader so highly skillful and resilient. Wilson's problem now is to convince the party and the public that his government can deal with the country's critical problems.

Problems Facing the New Government

The Economy

The Prime Minister's immediate concern will be to stimulate Britain's sagging economy. The morning after his reelection, he admitted that "it will indeed be a hell of a slog for the next couple of years." In March 1974 he inherited an economy plagued with: an inflation rate of about 17 percent; rising unemployment; a record trade deficit of about $10 billion; and declining production, caused by the 3-day work week instituted during the winter, when the coal miners were on a prolonged strike.

Wilson and his Cabinet settled the strike by giving the miners virtually what they wanted and put industry back on a regular production schedule. Mandatory wage controls were replaced by voluntary restraints, and the Industrial Relations Act, opposed by the unions, was repealed. Wilson moved cautiously in proposing new wealth and gift taxes, launching a defense review and tempering Labor's pledge for expanded nationalization.

The heart of Wilson's Labor Party program was and will continue to be the social contract. Under the tems of this fragile agreement, the government agreed to meet certain union demands—to raise pension and social security benefits, to freeze rents and to stabilize mortgage interest rates—and in exchange the unions agreed to curb their members' demands for wage increases.

For the future, Wilson's government is committed to a continuous enrichment of this social contract. The promised additional benefits to the workers include a better deal for pensioners; a revision of income taxes so that the affluent will bear a larger burden; and more programs to aid the poor. Wilson must make both the rank and file and the union leaders happy but has reminded them of the other half of the contract—wage restraint. He has warned them that Britain "cannot expect any significant increase in living standards in the next year or so" and that the country cannot afford "power groups, whoever they are, trying to seize more than their share of what is available."

Defense

Despite his party's determination to make drastic cuts in the defense budget and reduce Britain's defense commitments, Wilson has moved

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slowly to implement the pledges. (His party's left wing has pressed for a 30 percent slash in defense expenditures and the removal of nuclear bases from Britain.) Wilson has said that, starting from the basis of the multilateral disarmament negotiations, Labor would seek to remove Polaris bases from Britain. He added, "We have renounced any intention of moving toward a new generation of strategic nuclear weapons."

Wilson has also asserted that Labor will continue its support for NATO as an instrument of détente as well as of defense. The government's ultimate objective is to achieve a "satisfactory relationship in Europe" through the concurrent phasing out of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Labor will also seek to bring the current negotiations in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe to a successful end.

Northern Ireland

Labor is aiming for a political solution in Northern Ireland that will enable Catholics and Protestants to work together. Wilson has said that any new Ulster government must be based on power-sharing. He has said that British troops will not be withdrawn before a political settlement is achieved.

Wilson lacks experience and understanding of Ulster's problems, however. He demonstrated this lack by alienating the Protestants there in mid-1974, when he publicly referred to them as "spongers."

Foreign Relations

With the United States

The keystone of Labor's foreign policy has been good relations with the United States, and Wilson proudly states that Anglo-US relations are now better than they have been for some years. He is personally friendly toward this country

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Wilson has visited the United States often during the past 10 years. He met former President Richard Nixon several times during 1974 in European capitals.

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Secretary of State Kissinger and Prime Minister Wilson, July 1974

With European Neighbors

As leader of the Labor Party and as Prime Minister, Wilson has generally maintained close relations with the leaders of Europe's dominant powers, France and Germany. They have not met often, however, and their discussions have focused on European rather than international matters. During March-October 1974 French officials dealt with Wilson's minority government as if it were a lame duck administration. The few private talks held between Wilson and French President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing centered on European Community problems, because the Labor government has been seeking better membership terms. The two governments have also agreed to continue the construction of the Concorde, the Anglo-French supersonic airplane.

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He initially supported Britain's move to join the Common Market but soon began to vacillate. Under pressure from anti-Market forces in his party, Wilson has begun a renegotiation of the terms agreed to in 1972 by the Conservative government. His government is pledged to hold a referendum within 12 months to let the electorate express its views on the new terms.

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With Other Countries

Wilson promises that a Labor government will oppose all forms of racial discrimination and colonialism everywhere and will support the liberation movements of southern Africa. He has paid tribute to the strength of the Commonwealth countries, pointing out that they have shown close harmony in dealing with problems affecting the Third World.

Early Life and Career

The son of an industrial chemist, James Harold Wilson was born in Yorkshire on 11 March 1916. He won scholarships to secondary schools and to Jesus College, Oxford, where he graduated with first class honors in philosophy, politics and economics. In 1937, at the age of 21, he became a lecturer in economics at New College, Oxford, and the following year he was a fellow of University College.

During 1940-41 Wilson was economic assistant to the War Cabinet Secretariat, and in 1942-43 he served as secretary of the Greene board of investigation into miners' wages. In 1943 he was appointed director of economics and statistics in the Ministry of Fuel and Power.

Wilson was appointed parliamentary secretary to the Ministry of Works in 1945 and transferred to the Trade Ministry as secretary for overseas trade in March 1947. In October 1947 he received his first Cabinet-level post as President of the Board of Trade, at the unusually early age of 31. Wilson resigned that post in April 1951 in protest against the heavy cost of the government's rearmament program. Later, while in opposition, he served as his party's chief spokesman on financial affairs, and then on foreign affairs, until his election as leader in 1963.

Prime Minister

1964-70

Wilson became the youngest British Prime Minister in this century when he led the Labor Party to a narrow victory in the October 1964 general election. During his first year in office, he successfully met a series of financial and political crises and established himself as a national leader. His party was returned to power with a substantial majority in the general election of March 1966, and he formed his second government.

Beginning in 1967, political and economic setbacks at home and abroad seriously reduced the morale and prestige of Wilson's government and its standing before the electorate. A series of strikes, defeats in by-elections, failure to gain Common Market membership, and a reduced loyalty among

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leading.Cabinet members all combined to create a "crisis in confidence" in his leadership. He called a snap election in June 1970, a year before his term of office formally expired; and in spite of consistently favorable polls throughout the 3-week campaign, his party was defeated.

The defeat was attributed to a combination of overconfidence, Labor Party apathy, and an unexpectedly strong consumer revolt over continuing inflation. Wilson's position within the party remained unchallenged, however, and in July 1970 he was overwhelmingly reelected as leader by the Labor Members of Parliament. He served as opposition leader in Parliament during 1970-74.

1974

In February 1974 Conservative Prime Minister Edward Heath called an election to determine, as he said, who really rules Britain—the government or the trade unions. (His government was unable to reach a negotiated settlement with the coal miners and trade unions, and the resulting shortages forced him to implement a 3-day work week and other austerity measures.) After the election, in which neither the Conservatives nor the Laborites gained a majority, Heath resigned. Wilson's Labor Party won fewer popular votes but more seats in Parliament—301 to 296 for the Conservatives and 38 scattered among other parties—and the Queen charged him with forming a minority government.

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Personal Data

Wilson's colleagues regard him as more of a compromiser than a man of strong convictions. He likes to listen to all views on a subject and then try to make the decision that will satisfy the most people. His brilliant mind, political acumen and phenomenal debating skill and wit are offset, in the eyes of his critics, by a record of opportunism, deviousness and shifting loyalties. He inspires admiration and, at times, respect—but not affection.

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His deftness in parliamentary maneuvering and persuasion

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A short, stocky man, Wilson smokes a pipe constantly; enjoys plain food, and drinks moderately (lager or bourbon). He shuns social life, keeps his personal life private, and apparently has no close political "cronies." Raised as a Congregationalist, Wilson is a man of simple tastes and habits,

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Apart from his family and politics, reading and an occasional round of golf are his only known relaxations. He follows soccer, dislikes cocktail parties and shows no interest in music or the theater.

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Family

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In 1940 Wilson married Gladys Mary Baldwin, the daughter of a Congregationalist minister.

They stay in their townhouse near the Parliament building, rather than No. 10 Downing Street, the official residence of the Prime Minister;

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Mr. Wilson with Giles, Mrs. Wilson, Robin and daughter-in-law Joy (1969)

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The Wilsons have two grown sons. [redacted] (b)(6)

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Both Wilson and his wife are authors. Mrs. Wilson's *Selected Poems* was on the bestsellers list in 1970. The Prime Minister's books include: *New Deal for Coal,* 1945; *In Place of Dollars,* 1952; *The War on World Poverty,* 1953; *The Relevance of British Socialism,* 1964; *Purpose in Politics,* 1964; *The New Britain,* 1964; *Purpose in Power,* 1966; and *The Labor Government, 1964-70,* 1971.

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